

USES OF THE PAST IN GOLA DISCOURSE¹

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I

KNOWLEDGE of the past is a highly valued commodity among the Gola of West Africa. 'Setting things straight' and 'putting a proper form to things' is a major preoccupation of this highly articulate people. There is no man among them worth his salt who is not ready at the slightest provocation to 'make new ideas from old ones' (*ke djike dje yun gogo*), or, more literally, to present 'new ideas of the old people'. But there are many cultural restrictions and formal requirements which must guide the approach to things past. The past is considered to be the repository of all important sacred and secular knowledge, and the act of formal retrospection is the duty of qualified men of wisdom who are expected to apply their accumulated memories to the solution of problems confronting the living present.

The technique of formal retrospect is called history in our culture. It involves a *way* of looking at the past, an *intention* as to its use, and the *act* of producing a cognitive result—a history. In our culture these results are often written and become documents as well. It has been a convention in Euroamerican thought to associate the 'historical frame of mind' with the documentation of complex and literate cultures such as our own, and to ascribe to non-literate and simpler cultures 'a primitive world view' lacking in any but a mythological-subjective time perspective. It is obvious that a civilization with a written language, a body of documentation preserved over a long span of the past, a class of specialists concerned with the evaluation of these materials, and a technology which requires continual reference to stored knowledge, will have a time perspective of greater depth and specificity in content than that of a small, relatively homogeneous and non-literate culture. On the other hand, to view historical-mindedness as a mode of cognition which is the prerogative of the scientific observer or of the well-informed layman of our own civilization is to be ignorant of the rich store of data collected by anthropologists concerning the cultural processes of so-called primitive peoples.

It is to be doubted that any human society will be found in which the requirements of social existence are on so rudimentary a level that a degree of objective appraisal and formal structuring of the past is not embodied as a distinct category of its culture, and for which there is not some delineation of social roles. This does not mean that there can not be found a great variation among societies in the extent to which their members

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conceive of the past in either objective or mythological terms, in the depth of time comprehended, or in the concern for validation of its assumed content. It is suggested, rather, that the making of 'history' is a functional requirement of social existence that will be manifested in some form in any human society, though the outsider may have difficulty in identifying it in terms familiar to him.

Gola society is far from representing one of the simpler types which anthropologists have studied. Yet it does reveal the social organization of a non-literate people with limited technology, small population, and the essentially kin-based units with shallow historical depth which is frequently termed 'primitive'. They are distributed among a number of small chiefdoms in north-western Liberia, and speak a distinctive language. Their neighbours are the Vai and De to the coastward, the Mende and Kissi to the north-west, and the Gbande, Belle, and Kpelle to the east and southward. Their cultural interrelations with these surrounding peoples have been intensive for more than four centuries, and the Gola share with them relatively common features in economy and social organization. This region is a small one geographically, yet presents an intricate picture of a large number of distinct ethnic groups in close proximity, each with its own language and characteristic variations of regional cultural patterns.²

The Gola are forest agriculturalists, organized into sections whose boundaries conform essentially to the traditional territories of the old chiefdoms (*ma fuwa*) which had been established prior to Liberian colonial occupation in the second decade of the last century.³ In the present day these sections constitute Paramount Chieftainships, but in the old days they were made up of a multiplicity of petty monarchies with a high degree of local autonomy. The traditional arrangement involved a central village surrounded by satellite hamlets in which the dominant class of the population was a land-owning patrilineage made up of the descendants of the founder. The related sub-lineages were ranked according to distance from this founding ancestor. A large proportion of the population of these minute societies, however, was contained in numerous attached lineages of non-related immigrants—whether Gola or non-Gola—who had been incorporated by patronage or intermarriage, and whose members were granted theoretically tentative rights to the use of lands. In addition to these, the small households of the various clients, slaves and other dependents of the wealthier families contributed still further to the social heterogeneity of the chiefdoms.

Much of the coastal territory which the Gola now occupy was a dense

² A more detailed presentation of the regional and historical relations of the Gola has been made elsewhere by the author. See 'The Setting of Gola Society and Culture: Some Theoretical Implications of Variation in Time and Space', *The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, no. 21, Autumn 1959, Berkeley, 43-125.

³ The Gola word *fuwa* is usually translated by them into English as 'country' (*ma fuwa*—pl.). More precisely, however, it designates a territory claimed and inhabited by a cluster of related lineages, or by a centralized political entity such as a chiefdom or a state.

uninhabited rain-forest until as late as the eighteenth century. Their slow westward migration from the interior region of Komgba in the mountains of north-eastern Liberia began in the seventeenth century under pressure from the powerful savanna empires of the Western Sudan. Like many of their neighbours, the Gola retreated into the coastal forests where they became widely dispersed through migration, warfare and the slave trade. In the early nineteenth century they had just succeeded in consolidating their new territory when they were faced with the growing power of European and American colonial settlements on the coasts of Sierra Leone and Liberia. For over a century they resisted Liberian government authority, and established themselves as successful entrepreneurs in the trade between the coast and the far interior markets. With the termination of the Kanga War in 1918-19, their resistance to Liberian domination of the hinterland was broken, and the last of the recalcitrant chiefdoms of the Western Province was brought under effective Liberian control.

With these facts in mind we may turn to an inquiry into the nature of Gola retrospect.

II

Gola knowledge of the past is closely associated with genealogy and with the founding of important towns. As warfare and migration over many centuries have resulted in the expansion into new territory, a great majority of their towns are of recent origin and genealogies seldom exceed four or five generations in depth. It is the business of the elders of great families, however, to prepare themselves as reliable sources of information about the past.⁴

An elder with a poor memory, or 'whose old people told him nothing', is a 'small boy' among elders and might very well be looked upon with contempt by younger persons. Young people are not expected to know such things. Knowledge of the past is accumulated as one grows old. As one outlives one's grandparents and parents, it is assumed that their wisdom has been invested in their most beloved and oldest living descendants. Furthermore, it is the elders who have the closest contact with the ancestors—'the dead people' (*anyun fa*)—and through their traditional office as intermediaries between the living and the spirits of the dead they are expected to have acquired a thorough-going command of the chronology of personages and events in the past. Without this knowledge it is said that a man would live out his life as a child 'never knowing himself', and 'having no means to settle matters'.

Considerable positive value is attached to growing old, and the life-span is divided into well-defined periods in which a person is expected to know no more and no less than his age allows him. It is presumptuous for a young man to display knowledge that his brief time in the world has not

⁴ In Gola terminology *ke kpo* refers to the patrilineal descent group, and *o sa* to the domestic unit. When the English word *family* is used by the Gola the former grouping is implied.

given him a right to exhibit publicly. Regardless of his stock of information, it is good form for a man to plead ignorance about matters which are the property of his elders in the gerontocratic hierarchy. Yet it is taken for granted that all persons are hungry for knowledge, and that each is accumulating his own private store against the day when he can use it with approval. This is particularly true of matters pertaining to the past, and it is common for young persons who have listened to the reminiscences of their elders to remark, 'When I am old these things will bring me small coins'. The allusion, here, is to the custom of 'showing respect' to all old persons by presenting them with gifts for any information which has been elicited from them.

When asked a question requiring him to tap his resources of judgement and knowledge, an elder will frequently make a preliminary statement indicating the scope of his information about the subject. Then he will state, 'But this is not the deep part'. If this fails to bring forth the proper token of 'respect', or if the gift is less than anticipated, his response may take the form of a proverb (*say*): 'Something of value must not be treated as worthless'. An elder with any pride in his status will not proceed without an adequate material expression of esteem on the part of a younger solicitor. Among peers, however, knowledge may be bartered in the sense that information of equivalent value is considered to be involved in the exchange.

This custom is so widely effective among the Gola that the outsider coming among them as a student of their culture must also conform to it. He will be wise to approach the oldest members of the community first—preferably beginning with the very oldest regardless of the individual's direct usefulness to the investigation in progress. Unless he does so, a strong sense of protocol will cause the other elders to be reluctant to speak freely. It will be explained to the outsider that one is judged by one's discernment in such matters and by one's ability to ascertain the most direct route to the source of information desired. 'A child should not be asked how it came into the world', it is said, 'nor will Madam Hippopotamus know how Spider builds his house.'

Once the outsider has given evidence of his good manners and his good sense by taking the right path to knowledge it becomes a mark of special honour for each elder to make a contribution to his understanding. This is particularly so in view of the fact that these old men represent the various leading families in the community and are therefore concerned that their partisan versions of any matters dealing with the past are placed on record. Until his elders have spoken their piece, no younger person of merit will venture a public opinion about questions that have been placed before him; for he risks ridicule and loss of face in volunteering information which he does not rightly own by virtue of his earned status. A young person being interviewed by the anthropologist will excuse himself in order to confer with 'the old people'. When he returns at last, he comes armed with a version which the investigator will discover to be a quite standard one. Consequently, it is not unusual to find that most of one's contacts in a

certain community have been running to the same 'old people', who in some instances turn out to be one particular old man or old woman. In the case of occasional inconsistent versions, the differences are inevitably traced to rival traditions among families which tend to validate one another in all respects except where certain crucial issues are involved.

The experience of the present writer's Gola interpreter offers an illustration in point. This young man was present at all interview sessions during the entire period of ethnological field study. After a number of months of this activity in various sections of Gola country, his accumulation of knowledge became a very special problem to him. His memory was excellent, and he had achieved in a short while what few men in his society could expect in the way of a detailed and many-faceted understanding of his own culture even by living to a great age. Furthermore, he had gained a critical view of the material presented by a large number of elders in many different communities. He had become, in fact, a unique individual among his peers, a young man burdened with knowledge and its accompanying stresses far beyond his years. It was remarkable, however, how consistently he withheld his private opinions from all persons older than himself within his own culture, and never indicated in any way that a private judgement existed. Yet he would discuss his views freely with the investigator, and after every interview he would insist upon going over the recorded materials in order to indicate where 'that old man had lied', or how another had 'left out the most important things', or how still another had 'tried to push his own family up and push others down'. He became a great asset to his own family by relating to its elders all that had been said, a procedure which provided them with a potential advantage by reinforcing their store of useful knowledge about their neighbours, and alerting them to sources of friction with rival kin groups. The advantages in initiative which this situation produced for his family was considerable.

Though it was widely known that this condition obtained, the young man's usefulness as an interpreter did not appear to be diminished in any way. To the contrary, it seemed to be taken for granted and even enhanced his prestige. The elders of his community would frequently joke that he was becoming an elder before his time, or remark in an aside that such-and-such a bit of information would now certainly make him sit up and take notice for it involved some ancient controversy between his lineage and theirs. Their respect for his growing knowledge caused them to look upon him with affection, and this was expressed in such remarks as 'He is learning all that we know, but he is well brought up and will not get ahead of himself', or, 'To own such a son makes the father rich'. There were, nevertheless, greater demands placed upon him to show deference, dependence and submission in order to prove his real humility. This he did by maintaining an exaggeratedly impeccable deportment. He was clearly a young man aware of his unusual opportunity and preparing himself to be a leading elder, one day, like his father before him.

III

There are two basic values involved in the Gola concept of the past. First of all, it is believed that no person can know his place in society or appreciate fully the kind of person he is unless he is familiar with the genealogy of his own family. The term *djewe mio* refers to 'my line of ancestors', or to 'those people from whom I have come'.⁵ Though emphasis is placed on patrilineal descent, one may reckon one's *djewe* through either mother's or father's patrikin, or both, depending upon the advantage that is to be gained by whatever choice is made. Usually, however, an individual has been raised by the kin of either one or the other of his parents so that his knowledge of his ancestors will be limited exclusively to the *djewe* of that side of his family which has trained him.

The advantage of a great family with many well-informed elders lies in the degree to which the record of one's *djewe* is carefully maintained. By means of the amply stocked memories of the elders, one's kinship ties may be asserted at the appropriate time to include a vast number of one's contemporaries. A small family with unimportant and ill-informed elders will be limited in its range of useful alliances, and will lack the prestige and unity of a family that can offer its younger members a sense of pride and security in a clearly defined tradition.

A genealogy involving important ancestors and great deeds is a crucial factor in the individual's self-evaluation. A family whose ancestral record is sketchy is forced to rely on others for this information and is always at a disadvantage in seeking its own interests. A real *dja kwe*—'a free-born person of the country'—knows his own worth because he is able to ramify his line of descent and validate its connexions within the larger society of which he is a part.

A second basic value in the Gola concept of the past is the importance attached to the ancestors as distinct personalities who continue to concern themselves with the affairs of their living descendants. These ancestors guard their own personal interests and that of the family jealously. They are easily angered by an infraction of family laws, or any failure to demonstrate proper respect and concern for their interests. Furthermore, their memory of the issues which confronted them during their own lifetime is great, and they expect their descendants to fulfil whatever pledges they might have made, revenge any wrongs done them, and respect the important decisions they have handed down. In so far as the ancestors resent and envy the living, they are easily provoked. It is within their power to bring sickness, poverty and death upon any descendants who fail in their duty. For this reason it is considered extremely important that the history of a family be sufficiently complete so that slights to the ancestors can be

⁵ The *djewe* is any reckoning of lines of descent through either or both parents. But in the specific sense implied by *djewe mio* it refers to the line of descent by which the speaker defines his position within a particular patrilineage—his *ke kpo*.

avoided or—should they occur—the source of the resulting difficulties may be ascertained.

In the event of illness or disaster a well-informed group of elders in any family consult among themselves and arrive at an agreement as to the specific ancestor or ancestors whose wrath may have been incurred. Where such family knowledge is incomplete or lacking it is necessary to employ a specialist whose services are expensive and frequently unsatisfactory. A family that knows its main ancestors and the crucial incidents of their lives is in a position to 'settle matters' quickly and successfully. It is said that many problems which might have been resolved simply through knowledge of the family past become extended and costly matters because of the failure of an individual or a family in this regard. Moreover, to know the heroic achievements of one's ancestors is to be able to assert a prestigious tradition with regard to one's own kin group.

With the emphasis upon the *djewe* in the Gola view of the past, it follows that any 'history' is family history and is limited in scope by the extent of known kinship ties and generational depth. Accounts of the past are, therefore, not only highly localized but tend to be restricted to the *djewe* of the individual providing the account, touching on broader events and relationships only to the extent which the ancestors' interests and activities warrant it. As this knowledge is considered to be the property of the elders of each family, great care and delicacy must be brought to bear in each account so as not to infringe upon the prerogatives of others. A single elder questioned about the kinship relations or family history of persons not directly related to him will invariably state, 'I cannot speak for their part . . . you must go to them'.

Occasionally there is, among the elders of a large and well-established town, a very old and greatly respected person who is believed to surpass all the others in knowledge of the past. By virtue of his age and vast experience the other elders will defer to him when any disagreement arises among them as to detail in substance or chronology. Such ancient persons—whether men or women—transcend the boundaries of disparate kindred, for they have become in a real sense the grandparents of all within the community. In that they may speak of all the members of a town and its surrounding villages as 'my children' it follows that they alone possess the licence to speak freely and generally about the history of a town or *fuwa* (the traditional territory which a ruling family controls). If such an ancient elder happens to be a member of the ruling family as well, his or her knowledge is taken as irrefutable regardless of how distasteful a version of history may be to any particular family of the community.

It is only from these very old persons that one receives anything like a chronologically ordered and dramatically unified view of past events in the sense that 'a history' implies in Western thought. They have arrived at a point in age and experience where they can see the whole, and may be allowed to do so without criticism or fear of reprisal. They are considered

to be objective, having passed beyond the stage of life in which petty rivalries or self-interest would cause them to distort their judgements. The whole of the known past becomes the special property of such persons, and it is to them that all others repair for information and advice. They are the closest to the *yun fa*—the ancestors—for it is indeed through them who are about to enter the ancestral ranks that the *yun fa* speak to the living. During their lifetime they associated with the living ancestors who are now *yun fa*. They are closer to the beginnings and are the only members of the community who have a right to speak with assurance about the origins of things.⁶

But even the boundaries of knowledge of such remarkable old people are usually limited to the town or *fuwa* of their extended family. They will readily affirm that they know little or nothing of the past of the Gola of other 'countries', unless, by chance, one of their parents had been an elder of that *fuwa* and had imparted that knowledge directly. The phrase 'We Gola' most often refers to those people within the *fuwa*, or within that complex of adjacent *fuwa* who have had long-standing interrelationship. Nevertheless, it will be affirmed that all people who speak the Gola language are remotely related and that they have a common origin. The idea of an all-Gola past, however, is a vague one and the elders of any one section of the Gola tribal area will admit that they know very little about the Gola of remoter sections or 'how those people came to be'.

The exception to this general rule is provided by a few renowned individuals in each generation who have attained considerable age after a lifetime of varied experience, travel and responsible position. The fame of such persons extends far beyond their local group, and they may be called upon to preside at councils in distant Gola chiefdoms, or may even be visited by delegations seeking authoritative historical data. The late Kpongbo Zu, an elder of the Te-Gola, was honoured by the Liberian Government as a 'Tribal Historian' for these reasons, and he was invited to participate as an expert witness in all major proceedings involving the Western Province. His name was known by the elders of the remotest Gola sections, and the author was frequently advised to seek his opinion when questions arose which could not be resolved. Gola tradition refers to such persons in the past as advisors of powerful rulers, or as revered persons sought out to arbitrate tribal or inter-tribal disputes among chiefdoms.

The sectionalism and kin group orientation of Gola society discourages the maintenance of an all-Gola or regional tradition on the local level. Such comprehensive historical traditions are the special property of specific

⁶ The sacredness of such persons is derived from the hierarchical and gerontocratic values of Gola society. Accumulated experience and great age have made them 'holy', a phenomenon of particular significance in a region where life-expectancy is less than forty years. Yet it must be noted that the powers which such very aged persons wield seem to be relegated to the sphere of blessings and sage advice. Their role is that of the revered exemplar and does not intrude upon that of specialists such as diviners, magicians or curers.

individuals whose knowledge is solicited only in those instances where validation of this kind is considered appropriate. In the local situation individual family tradition is a rigorously guarded body of information, and detailed knowledge of other families in the same area may be disclaimed despite the fact of generations of intermarriage and close association. Though much of this behaviour is a matter of protocol in the interrelations between kin groups, it represents a profoundly basic value in Gola culture. One does not learn what is not one's business to know—or better still, one does not divulge what one is not supposed to know. For this reason the elders of a given town—comprising the leadership of a group of more or less related families—prefer to discuss the history of their town in council. In this way each elder can rise in turn to present a formal 'public' version of the genealogy and important historical events which constitute the tradition of his family. The presentation will require a considerable amount of improvisation and skilful editing in order to bring its form and content into line with the unified product which is the goal of the council. One can expect great variation among accounts of family history depending upon whether the presentation is made in a public or private gathering.

Any meeting called by the elders for the purpose of clarifying a problem which has arisen between families will attract a large crowd. For it is under these conditions that the elders will compete among themselves for stature as historians, orators, and representatives of their own kin groups. They can also be counted on to use the opportunity for admonishing the 'hard-headed' youth of the community, and it is said that at such times 'one can learn the secrets of the elders without showing respect (giving a gift) for each is trying to make himself great before the others'. Much surreptitious humour passes among the younger men at these meetings to the effect that 'the old men are wasting their property: they are like a man with a hole in his full sack of rice who does not know why the chickens have come running'.

These councils, which begin as informal court proceedings, often turn into history-making debates. A major disagreement arises and each elder stands in order of rank, to give his version of the past which has bearing upon the matter. As the narrations continue they become intricately enmeshed with mutual reference and subtle innuendo. At times, one or more of the old men will interrupt a speaker with an epithet, or turn to the watching crowd to shout a disclaimer. All the techniques of Gola 'palaver' are used to dramatize one's own position at the expense of the others, and to convince the listeners of its reasonableness. Councils of this sort may continue for days, or be dropped for long intervals and reconvened at a later date. It is said of some councils that 'the palaver has never finished, but hangs upon a hook for ever waiting to be taken down again'.

It is customary, however, for councils to remain in session until a consensus is reached. This is often achieved by appealing to the oldest and most revered man among them to 'settle this matter properly, or we shall

seem as small boys before the people'. Upon accepting the assignment, the old man may use any of a number of means to bring about a compromise. He may repeat the version of events he gave earlier in the meeting, he may reconstruct one of the other elder's versions which had been well received, or by astutely adjusting the essential features of all the presentations he may create a compromise version which brings him fame throughout the countryside. Once he has spoken under these conditions, his version of the matter becomes 'the true history' produced by that particular council. All members of the community are admonished on the spot to remember it well so that they will know how they 'came to be one people'. Many elders conclude their speeches in such councils by turning to the assembled crowd and stating, 'You are hearing your ancestors speak through us today: do not forget these things or you will be a stupid people!'

Despite these admonitions, each of the elders who has participated in the council will return to his own house, call his oldest sons and his brothers together, and reinstruct them concerning the original and unique family version of the matter. This will include much that he had not revealed in public—'the secrets which make our family strong and which others wish to learn in order to bring us low'. The public consensus version is derided as 'the proper truth for children and strangers', while the family version is praised as 'the truth for grown men that will make them kings in the world'.

But should the same elders be confronted with questions as to events prior to the earliest known ancestor or more general regional relations, the attitude and behaviour is quite different. Here the responses will take such form as 'that was before our old people knew themselves' (before the memory of the ancestors) or 'the old people did not see that'.

Questions concerning the origin of the Gola will invariably elicit remarks of this kind. Occasionally, however, one will be told that there is a very old person who knows about such things. If he is close at hand the other elders will call him. He will be asked to give the 'very deep history'. His sparse remarks will be listened to with great respect and general agreement. The author has been present at meetings of this sort in which two or three ancient and venerable elders gave as many sketchy versions of remote antiquity—one reporting that 'the Gola people of this town came from nowhere else, but rose out of this ground', while another stated that 'all the Gola of the world were spewed from a great mountain in Komgba', while still another may offer that the Gola came from some far distant land of Africa. Each of these was announced and accepted as *Goa gbli*.⁷ There

⁷ The term *Goa gbli* has reference to the names of two legendary figures from a Gola origin tale. Goa was a woman 'King' who, with her husband, Gbli, remained with a majority of her people in the ancient Gola homeland of Komgba. Her sister Golo, however, led a large contingent of migrants into the new forest territories to the west. Thus the former are known as the 'real old Gola', or Goa, while the latter became known as the 'new Gola', or Golo, after their leaders. The term *Goa gbli*, therefore, has a special qualitative significance and is not used in the same contexts as the common Gola word for truth (*tunyan*), or the real truth (*tunyan kena*).

was no indication that they contradicted one another or that any issues had been raised which required clarification. It was all true, because these old men were speaking of that dim past which the ancestors had 'forgotten'. It would be thought rude to correct them or to ask for more information after they had finished their brief statements. It is explained that these particular elders are so old that they are living already 'with their heads in the other world'. Thus they are beginning to learn things that they never learned in this life. Their minds have become like those of great doctors and prophets who commune with the spirits of the dead. The things of which they speak are *ke gwa*—things of dreams which have come to them 'in another form' than through experience.

Frequently a younger elder will take upon himself the task of presenting a version of Gola pre-genealogical antiquity. If there are other elders present they will listen to him without comment, but later state that he is ignorant and merely putting on airs. 'We Gola do not know of those old things', they will say, 'we know only what our ancestors saw and what they told us. They did not tell us things which happened before they were born or which they did not see.' Just as frequently an elder will attempt to impress the outsider by stating that the question he has been asked concerning the ancient past of the Gola pertains to matters which he knows well but which he cannot speak out because they are 'secrets' of the town or of the Poro society. Other elders, when hearing of this, will ridicule him saying, 'If that is the case, he knows secrets which none of us know: if he knows how life came upon this earth or how the Gola came to be, then he is not a man but *Daya* (God)'.

IV

These considerations provide a clue to still another dimension of the Gola concept of the past. When the Gola elder speaks of his 'old people' (*yun fa* or *yun gogo*) he is referring to all of his known ancestors. In the recent past these comprise a host of maternal, paternal and affinal relatives; but in the more distant past the host dwindles to the thin line of patrilineal descent of either the maternal or paternal side—though occasionally both are remembered—terminating in the founder of a town or the first known ancestor to have established himself in the area. In a few cases the route of migration to the area is known and the genealogical depth may be extended a generation or two, but this is rare. Genealogical depth varies slightly from section to section and offers some indication of the relative occurrences in time of the major Gola migrations from the homeland area. But there are many towns which are known to be far older than the earliest ancestor who appears in the genealogy. This ancestor may be thought to be the descendant of founders of the town, but his predecessors have been forgotten. A clear distinction is made between those 'real' events which took place during the lives of the known ancestors and those dimly

perceived and often mysterious events which may be attributed to the forgotten and unknown people of the far distant past.

Any responsible Gola elder will intersperse his historical account with frequent interjections of such comments as 'This is what I have seen myself', or 'My old people saw this and told it to me'. As long as it is possible to state that a known ancestor reported the information personally to a descendant, and that by this process the information was at last conveyed to the one who is now speaking, the account is considered valid. 'Fact' is what one has seen oneself or what has been reported to one by responsible persons who have seen it, or by still others whom they considered to be responsible. Thus 'history' is made up of this kind of fact. There is no Gola term equivalent to the word 'history' in English. *Ke yun fa* may be used loosely to mean 'matters or things pertaining to the ancestors or the dead', but this is more like our phrase 'days gone by'. The closest approximation would be the word *kabande* which in one of its usages designates a whole class of tales which are meant to convey a moral lesson. 'Parables' might be offered as an adequate translation of the term *kabande*. Another meaning of the term is 'to put things in order'.

Any story which provides directly or indirectly a comment on human behaviour and succeeds in making a point from which an evaluative lesson can be extracted would be called *kabande*. This would include the entire repertoire of Gola myth and legend involving animals of the forest, strange creatures, and human beings. These tales are never told in isolation except under the artificial conditions created by the outside investigator. Invariably they are told in order to provide a specially significant comment about an event familiar to all the listeners, or to point up criticism or praise of the human behaviour manifested in the event. Though the main body of the tale is seldom altered, slight alterations might be made by the teller in order to stress his message. On the other hand the tale may be told without change while the teller allows the particular situation and time in which it is told to produce the desired effect. This is true *kabande*. All tales, whether told by professional storytellers, spontaneously at informal gatherings, or by older people to children in order to amuse them or put them to sleep, are *kabande* in the sense that intrinsically they provide instruction and examples pertaining to conduct.

The word *kabande* is also used in reference to anecdotes about persons in the past. This is to be distinguished from the mere description of the *djewe*—the account of a genealogy. It is difficult for even the best informed Gola elder to confine himself to a strictly chronological presentation of persons or events either forward or backward in time. If he is prodded into doing so by an over-zealous investigator he will soon become bored or annoyed. This is not the way knowledge of the past is normally presented. It is never given all at once, or in a particular chronological sequence. It is episodic, for in actual practice an old man will choose from his vast store

of knowledge of the past some event or situation which illustrates a point he wishes to make. Unless it is pertinent to some matter at hand it would not be recalled. Gola history takes the form of *kabande*. These are dramatic episodes from the past which illustrate a point. A council of elders called together to present the 'history' of their town will begin with a statement of one of its members about the special greatness of the town, or allude to the secret laws which have protected it. Then one by one the elders will rise and describe the exploits of one or a group of his ancestors in regard to a war, a significant marriage, a feud, or a rise to power—with little regard for orderly sequence in time, but every account adhering closely to the primary theme developed in the initial statement. *Kabande*, therefore, as applied to an historical or any other account is a form of instruction. It has been variously defined for the present writer at different times as 'real experiences', as 'the facts', as 'truth', as 'examples', and as 'real happenings'. It would seem to follow from all evidence that 'history' to the Gola means real experiences of real people which can be referred to as a guide in conduct and as an assurance of the continuity of values. A living person may present a *kabande* about his own experience, but if he wishes to be particularly effective he will recount one which was the experience of some remote ancestor and place it in conjunction with his own in order to indicate dramatically the enduring qualities of the advice or comment he had put forward.

A concept of empirical fact is, therefore, closely associated with *kabande* in its role of providing formal structure to the knowledge of the past. 'History' is an account of the experiences of known persons whose relationship to one can be clearly defined. Its validation is the degree of respect commanded by the age, intelligence and record of responsibility of the person who pronounces it. A responsible and convincing person will qualify each individual statement regarding the past with remarks to the effect that 'this was told to me by my brother who saw it', or 'I did not see this myself, but my grandfather was there and told me', or 'though this happened long before my parents knew life, their old people told this to them and they told it to me'. A most effective way of closing an account of historical events is to state, 'This is how it was told to me and if I am wrong the old, old people will know how to deal with me!'

There is a clear distinction between *kabande* as a mode of presentation of historical 'fact', and *kabande* involving mythological or otherwise fantastic content. The word *dong* refers to all stories that are not meant to be 'true' but which are told for purposes of entertainment. This would include a vast body of stories that we might place in a category of myths. A professional storyteller is known as *bla madong*—'teller of many stories'—which is the same term that might also be applied to any overly fanciful child or adult to indicate that he is a great liar. *Dong* are always presented in *kabande* form—that is, with the purpose of making a moral point or

illustrating a desirable or undesirable mode of conduct. They differ from the historical or seriously instructive *kabande* in so far as they are satirical and humorous, in the stock characters both human and non-human, and in the fantastic situations which define their plots.

A proper *bla madong* presents himself as a caricature of the elders and offers his humorous wisdom as a subtle clowning directed at the custodians of serious *kabande*. Thus he becomes expert at manipulating such remarks as 'I was there and saw this with my own eyes', or 'I was not there, but Spider was, and he told me'; he may even close his tale with what becomes an uproariously comic remark, 'If I have not told the truth, the old people will know how to deal with me'. In the light of his obvious distortion of real events, the unlikeliness of his characters, and his skilful contradictions, he builds about himself an air of daring and impiousness which wrings truth from its opposite.

This illustration of the two aspects of *kabande* is essential to an understanding of the Gola concept of 'history'. Real events which were the experiences of known people in the past would be considered the proper subject of historical discourse. Accounts of these events are distinctive in style, content and function from the *dong* which deal with the actions of men, animals and spirits in a world apart from or preceding the present order of things. In our own usage we might say that the Gola distinguish between local legend and general myth.⁸ Though any account to which a maxim is attached or implied would be called *kabande*—this is, the most general form of Gola dramatic or 'literary' discourse—an individual is well able to draw a line between what he believes to be 'real happenings' and 'just stories'.

Most local traditions involving migrations, the deeds of known ancestors, and the explanation of the origin of customs and certain natural phenomena are placed in the former category. This must in no way be taken to imply that the supernatural or the mysterious is any the less evident in such traditions, for in fact these accounts of 'real happenings' abound with miraculous occurrences and strange beings. The difference lies in the matter of validation discussed above. *Dong*, or what we might call general myth and fable, on the other hand, was not passed down with such qualification and the characters and events which it describes have no locus in time or any direct relation to known persons in the past. Gola history is, therefore, largely confined in depth and extent to the local group and the formally transmitted personal experiences of remembered ancestors. If one cannot recall the names of the particular ancestors to whom something was reported to have happened, the event itself tends to be forgotten or, at least, withheld because it lacks the necessary validation to be included.

The question of origins constitutes a special problem in this regard. Most tales explaining the origin and characteristics of mankind and its

⁸ Cf. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, 1946, 7-10.

customs, or other aspects of nature, are placed in the category of *ma dong*.⁹ These are usually fables in which human beings, beasts and *djina* (nature spirits) are interchangeable characters and in their protean mode perform feats and dramatize behaviour considered to be somehow original or classic. Such tales might explain how friendship came into the world, how Leopard got his spots, how Rabbit became so wise, where the stars come from, or what caused the forest to grow sparsely in some places.

There is, also, a more obscure category of origin accounts which verge upon the mythological mode of the *dong*, yet which could never appear in the repertoire of a professional storyteller, though indirect allusions might be made to them. These are the sacred and semi-sacred myths which have to do with the origin of important institutions, such as the Poro, the *fuwa*, or the Gola themselves. For the most part they are the secret property of a family, the great elders of a town, or the leaders of the secret societies. For example, the average person is aware that all the Gola came originally from the Komgba section of north-western Liberia, that women once dominated and ruled over men, or that the leaders of the secret societies never die. There is, however, great reserve about such matters. It is presumptuous and perhaps even dangerous for unauthorized persons to speak of them. On the other hand, the investigator will be struck by the apparent disinterest and lack of information revealed by those who are supposedly custodians of this knowledge. Everything that may have occurred before the time of the earliest remembered ancestor is considered to be beyond the province of living persons and speculation about such distant and mysterious matters is looked upon with suspicion. This is partly due to the fact that the origin of specific family 'laws' or of the meaning of rituals pertaining to the well-being of the community are carefully guarded secrets. No outsider can hear of them.

Secrecy and prohibition are particularly strong in regard to all matters pertaining to the Poro and Sande societies of the men and women, respectively, and it is reasonable to suppose that a great part of Gola formal tradition is maintained by the educative and ritual functions of these institutions. In the absence of this supposition one would be led to assume that Gola curiosity about the past is limited in depth to the extent of the genealogies of the local group and that only the vaguest impressions exist in regard to the origins of the group or of an all-Gola tradition of which it is a part.

But these tales are quite different to the Gola from the *dong*, for they are purported to have been handed down from the known ancestors as *Goa gbli*—'real old Gola truths'. For example, the mist and strange sounds which emanate from a certain mountain may be explained as the smoke fires and speech of a village of *djina* who live within the mountain. Their presence there may be attributed to a founder or other early ancestor who was able to commune with such spirits and invited them to

⁹ The plural form.

live in the mountain as guardians and secret henchmen of the human beings in the area. It actually happened, and this can be verified by the fact that a known individual performed the deed and responsible first-hand observers acknowledged it and reported the fact to their descendants. This is the 'Gola truth'—it is what the old people have seen and what they have told of their experiences. Again, the *kabande* of 'history' must be placed somewhere in the time-span of the *djewé*, and must be connected with human beings who can be identified by name and by relationship to the living. It is within this span of time that there is the greatest concern for the accuracy and consistency of 'fact'. Various versions of family and community history are being continually weighed and debated by councils of elders. These become crucial concerns where individual interests in property and old feuds depend upon the validation that can be extracted by reference to the commitments, deeds and wishes of ancestors. Beyond this time-span in which practical matters involving individual and family interests are concerned, there is seldom any contention about validity.

v

The Gola respect for knowledge of the past is a response both to its instrumental value in solving problems of the present and its quality of sacredness as the thoughts and experiences of the ancestors. The test of validity is not the consistency or 'fit' of a given version of past events, but whether or not the ancestors of the spokesman would be in agreement with the version. As the ancestors remain deeply concerned about their private interests, embodied in the prestige and property which they have passed down to their descendants, it follows that they prefer a view of the past which protects these interests. And though the elders of families are the custodians of knowledge of the past in this world, the ancestors are the final arbiters. It is taken for granted that the view of the past put forward by an elder will be the view which is most advantageous to him, his family, and his ancestors. Regardless of what may appear to the outsider as inconsistencies between rival family versions of the past, all is taken as the truth until that situation arises in which the past must be entered as evidence in a matter of honour or litigation. Then one's own version is held up as the truth and all others are characterized as incompetent. Should one fail to press one's family's interests in terms of a partisan appeal to the events of the past, the ancestors will take their revenge. Truth, then, is that which brings about the desired results, and no man can be blamed for stating what it is in his interests to state. He can only be blamed for lack of skill and failure to tie his own interests to issues sufficiently broad to attract an effective group in his support.

The ramifications of this approach to what is 'true', or 'fact', are great. The custodians of the true and the factual are those who possess the power to control the lives and the will of those about them. In the case of knowledge

of the past, it is the ancestors and the elders who are the custodians. They have the power to bestow or withhold their blessings. One's parents, one's owner, or one's ruler may be the custodian of truth in other matters. Regardless of one's private opinions, one accepts publicly the authoritative statement of one's superiors. There is a famous and ironic Gola *say* (proverb) which advises, 'When you are walking in the rain with the King listen to his words. He may look at the sky and say, "See how the sun shines and how clear it is." And you will say, "Yes, King, the sun shines and the day has never been so clear."' To correct the king, or to disagree with him, would imply one's equality or superiority. Thus there is a duality to truth: there is the truth which is accepted as such for practical reasons, or for reasons of good form; and there is the truth which one has learned through one's own experience, or which one's own judgement has selected.

Much of Gola humour emerges from a consciousness of this duality of truth based upon a hierarchy of authoritativeness. When the oldest elder has spoken—and should his view of a past event have diverged from that of others in significant detail—no one will contest it. Even in private the response to questioning about it would be, 'That is what he claims, that is what he knows'. If the speaker had been a man of the same age or younger, he might be corrected or even ridiculed.

On one occasion, when the investigator had pressed for an explanation of the discrepancy between the genealogies of two families, an old man shook his head and said:

You kwi (strangers from over the seas) want everything to be one way. We Gola see things in different ways. A country man does not hold himself so high as to think he can know what is true about everything. If someone higher than him says 'This is how it was' then he does not question that. What more about it does he know? If his grandfather and his King tell him two different things, *you* would say they are two different things, and *you* would want to make palaver (dispute) to find which one was above the other. But how can one know whether a grandfather or a King is greater? A country man does not ask what is true by talking to the words, but he asks 'Who is it that said the words', and from that he decides what is right. But if the grandfather and the King say different, then it is not different to a country man. Both are true, but one must wait a while to understand that. No one can know everything at once.

The old man ended his lecture to the author by saying that he would 'make a *kabande*' about this matter:

There was a great man with many slaves and followers. He was the brother of King Gaya of Mana, and my father's uncle. One day he found that much rice was gone from his kitchen. He called all his slaves together and said, 'One of you has taken rice from me'. Not one of them would agree. Then the man said to his old slave who had been with him for life, 'You have been eating rice I have not given you.' Though the old slave knew nothing of the rice, he agreed.

He was taken and whipped by the great man's sons. Now this *kabande* shows what respect is. The old slave respected his master and would not disagree with him. What his master believed was all he knew. He did not try to show his master to be wrong, for how could he live there if he did? Also he thought 'I do not know my master's mind in this thing. Maybe there is some reason for it which I will find out in time. Maybe I took the rice in my dreams, or maybe my master is testing me in some way.' This is how a country man is wise, and though that old slave was not of the Gola tribe, his wisdom is Gola wisdom.

This brief example of the *kabande* form illustrates the setting and mode of presentation of historical narrative. In this instance the author was the audience, the object of instruction. The proverb and the initial lecture were directed to his obvious failure to maintain the appropriate posture of respect, or to focus his attention on the most significant matters being elaborated. The resulting *kabande*, then, was a digression from the main line of discourse which had, for many hours, centred about a reconstruction of the old man's genealogy replete with the innumerable anecdotal accounts that provide the content of history. Yet even this digression was derived from an episode in which an ancestor of the old man had figured. Thus the continuity and the momentum of the narration was maintained. Moreover, the form of the entire presentation made by him may be described as a succession of short *kabande* held together by the central theme involving the greatness of the old man's family tradition, and by occasional interludes in which he extended or repaired the framework of his *djewe*. The investigator's overly frequent questions or interjections disturbed the orderly progression of this creative process, and called the old man's attention to the fact that he was dealing with a bumptious outsider who needed to be apprised of certain realities concerning the Gola concepts of truth, respect, and good form. The interruptions were interpreted as poor manners or, worse yet, an expression of doubt about the old man's skill and accuracy. It was taken to indicate that he was incapable of following the line of reasoning of the old man. In this context, information concerning chronological sequence in depth or the correlation of parallel genealogic sequences is considered irrelevant and is seldom volunteered. It is the quality of an event or a cluster of events which is the focus of interest.

The concept of the custodianship of knowledge is extended to all information which is known to be the special property or instrument of persons of power and success. This would include specialists who have acquired secret 'medicines' and 'laws', the elders and the ancestors, and persons holding public positions of sacred or secular authority. In Gola tradition it also applies to the knowledge brought among them by non-Gola peoples with prestige and power. Great warriors and sorcerers of the Loma, Mende, Gbande and Kpelle peoples figure importantly in Gola narratives of the past as persons sought after for the special powers they had brought from strange nations and gods. The Mandingo Muslim trader and teacher

was often an advisor to Gola kings and his possession of a script, his familiarity with strange countries in the interior of Africa, his fine clothing and other evidence of wealth, and a god who had given him a 'book' in which his laws were written, caused him to be deeply respected. Similarly, those who came from lands across the sea in great ships with a wealth of strange new goods and knowledge were courted and admired for the *djike dje*—the 'new ideas'—which they possessed.

Wealth and power are derived from knowledge, and those who possess the one are believed to have the other within their grasp. All who are able to establish authority over others and who prosper are believed to own some secret knowledge which explains their good fortune. The foreign warrior and sorcerer owned powerful 'medicines' provided by the *djina* and specialists of his people. The *kwi* had wealth and weapons to buy and enforce their authority over the land. Furthermore, they came with their own teachers who also had a 'book' which contained the laws of their god. The Gola looked upon the early Western missionary in much the same way as he had always looked upon the itinerant Muslim trader and scholar. It was considered advantageous to encourage them in order to learn their ways and find the secrets of their power. The great prestige attached to the learning of the Vai script arose as a response to the value placed on Arabic and European written languages which were thought to be crucial instruments of power in the hands of these foreign custodians of knowledge.¹⁰ It is common for prophecies and visions to be related as the warning of an ancestor who came to the visionary in a dream holding a paper in his hand from which he read the words of his statement.

The Gola concept of the past has been deeply affected by many influences from outside and has incorporated various bits of information from 'authoritative' sources. The idea that the Koran specifically mentions the Gola and that they originated from a section of Mecca 'in Egypt' has wide currency among Gola Muslims. During the 1957 dispute over the Suez Canal, Gola Muslims fasted in order to aid the defence of 'the old, old homeland of all the Gola'. This view is ironically congruent with that of many young persons who have been told by Christian missionaries that the tribes of Africa are among the lost tribes of Israel. Young Gola who have attended Liberian schools bring back information about Gola history which they read from the books of Liberian and European scholars. This information spreads rapidly—particularly where it fills the great void of the far past of Gola origins.

A book by a Liberian historian was for many years the standard history of Liberia in government schools and the colleges. The introduction makes mention of the Gola in the following context:

¹⁰ This famous script was invented by a Vai man in the mid-nineteenth century. It spread rapidly and was widely used by scribes throughout the chiefdoms of southern Sierra Leone and north-western Liberia until very recently.

The original home from which these African peoples travelled northward was in the region of the great lakes of Central Africa; and among one of the successive waves of people who took this northerly direction were the Golas, an apparently very virile stock in years gone by but now mostly decadent. Mr Karna believes that the Golas found already living along the coast-belt had probably descended to the coast at a time when the Negro race was emerging into view about some 100,000 B.C.—an age which the archaeological research of the African Society would rather tend to confirm. In fact, the result of these researches as well as the skull of *Pithecanthropus* [*sic*] recently found at Taungs seem to bear out the theory of Africa being the home of the first species of the human race evolved.

It is declared in the following pages of this book that Africa was populated by the dispersion of 'seven groups . . . speaking seven languages'. The Gola are reported to have been defeated in a great battle some six thousand years B.C. by invaders originating from 'the ancient empire of Monomotapa, or the realm of Undi, or the empire of the Greek King Maniluango, or Maluango'. Hanno's voyage is mentioned and he is said to have contacted the Gola at Cape Mount. 'It was these Gola people who grew so much hair on their bodies that Hanno saw and called them Gorillas.'¹¹

Works by Sir Harry Johnston, Lady Lugard and other Western writers have also been read by Gola students and the contents reported to the elders of their families in remote interior villages. On a number of occasions when the elders of a village had exhausted their resources of knowledge about Gola origins, the investigator would be asked whether he knew that his ancestors had written about the Gola long before he was born, and they would proceed to tell him what their 'young civilized' children had explained to them from 'those old books that tell more of the Gola than what we ourselves remember'. Just as many times it was explained to the writer that early European visitors to the coast thought the Gola were like monkeys because they must have been greeted by the *zo gbe* leaders of the women's Sande society who are garbed in costumes made from black-dyed leaves and vines, or that 'all the tribes of Liberia came from seven tribes' and that is why the years of Sande (women's secret society training) are three, and Poro, or *Gbon* (men's secret society training) are four. Does this not make the number seven, it was asked, and does this not show how the Gola came to be?

This material had been fully incorporated into Gola historical narrative in many of the more coastal chiefdoms as evidence of great antiquity and the glory of the past. The present writer found that information of this kind spread quickly and that often a chance remark by him among a council of elders in one section concerning something that had been written about Liberian history applicable to the Gola would have preceded him so that a few days later, in a far distant section, the remarks would be repeated to him by another group of elders as 'the deep part of history'.

¹¹ Aboyomi Karna, *History of Liberia*, Liverpool, 1926.

VI

We have seen that the formal products of Gola retrospect derive their content from a number of distinct categories of Gola knowledge. These histories, as we may call them, are constructed from the collective efforts of aged persons whose special skills are directed to arriving at a public consensus regarding the validity of past events and their meanings. One of the primary sources of historical data is the large store of legends concerning the more-than-lifelike ancestral figures. When told in the form of *kabande*, these legends constitute the moral 'lessons of the past'. They offer the basic formal pattern which, in its most extended and complex application, becomes the format for Gola historical narration.

But the framework by which events are related to one another in space and time is provided by the genealogies of important members of the community. Particular genealogical histories are, therefore, highly localized in temporal reference and content. Though the unique sequence of events is maintained with reference to the radiating lines of ancestors into the past, the durations of genealogical time are flexible and may be telescoped or expanded as a function of variable human perception and intent. There are, however, checks provided for this relativity of sociocultural time and the insularity of content. Cross-reference among genealogies is one of these provisions. Reference to widely known epochal events and to regional historical traditions affecting the Gola and their close neighbours is another. The more recent influence of western notions of time and conventions of dating is still another. Where validation becomes a crucial matter in issues contested before the public, Gola historians are eagerly alert to any and all means of proof that may be brought to bear by the manipulation of available knowledge.

There are circumstances in which a more or less objective time-scale becomes a crucial factor. In litigation proceedings, for example, an interesting transformation takes place in the uses of historical data. Here, it is necessary to justify one's actions by an appeal to precise locations in time and space. In a matter involving land ownership each of the contestants is armed with a version of events in the past which are meant to validate his claim, and justification requires that a third party can be convinced of the reliability of one among a number of rival versions. Questions of the succession of inherited titles and other properties, of temporary alienation, of particular agreements and payments made among ancestors are under these circumstances crucial issues involving the security and prestige of families. The leisurely qualitative refinement of the content of widely known episodes attached to the genealogical structure is no longer so important as the necessity to convince others that certain specific acts did take place at specific times and places and were casually related to one another in specific ways. Time markers of a more objective sort must be brought to bear in order to provide mutually validated points

of reference apart from the highly subjective context in which each of the parties selects its data. These markers are various. They comprise sequences of critical events which, when placed in general congruence with one another and when compared laterally, help define the content of epochs and place them in time.

The events which make up these sequences are those which have had a profound influence in the past over peoples of the entire region, are widely known, and are more general points of reference than any which might function in local histories. Famous rulers of important chiefdoms throughout the region have been incorporated into a regional tradition which is a common reference of this sort. There is no genealogical framework by which great personalities of far-flung chiefdoms and of different tribes can be connected with one another in space and time. The names of such men evoke the memory of an era and it is stamped with the quality of their exploits. Thus in placing other events in time, well-informed elders of any chiefdom of any tribe in western Liberia might state that they occurred in the time of Fa Fula Yenge of Gobla, or when Nyola ruled Senge, or when Sau Bosu was great at Boporo, or when Boyma Kwi went to Kpokpa. Another sequence involves great wars in which many chiefdoms had participated—the invasions of the Sofa and Susu mercenaries in the nineteenth century, the Suehn and Kanga wars of this century. Everyone of any stature should know in what order these events came and should be able to relate them in time to the historical sequences of his own locality.

These are aspects of a regional historical tradition which function as elements of a common framework in the sense of historical time for the heterogeneous population of the region. It is in these terms that the durations and significant episodes of 'subjective' local histories are correlated for effective inter-group relations.

An even more important aspect of this regional sense of historical time is the way in which the events of colonial and national domination have provided a basic temporal framework for mutual reference concerning relations over the past hundred and fifty years or so. In Liberia, for example, the arrival of the colonists constitutes an epochal event of first magnitude and the distinction of two general eras of the past—'before' or 'after' the first American settlers—is a common denominator of reference throughout the interior. The succession of governors and presidents of Liberia, major treaties between great kings and the national government, wars of resistance against expanding Liberian control, national legislation which affected the economic and political relations of the interior tribes, the appearance of motorways, railways, the plants of foreign concessions, new commodities, urban centres—all these provide well-defined and widely effective duration markers for the recent past. An additional factor is the diffusion of the Euroamerican system of quantified time involving the dating of events, the keeping of written records, and the increasing pressure for precision with reference to an objective time-scale.

The Gola sense of historical time, therefore, must be considered as a multiple, compartmentalized and variable phenomenon undergoing continual change. Furthermore, the different aspects of the sense of historical time are not considered equally appropriate under all conditions of an approach to organization of the data of the past. What is appropriate and normal as time-perspective for local history is not appropriate or normal for the use of history in regional relations. The transitional and emergent features of this phenomenon are, of course, associated with more general sociocultural changes involving an entire region. But it could not be said that a sense of historical time in the tribal cultures of the region was a product of European intrusion and domination; rather it might be said that these later events intensified the process of objectification of time-perspective which was inherent in the conditions which defined the early interrelations of these peoples. The earlier impact of Sudanic and Muslim culture, the migration of a heterogeneous population into the region, and the shifting foci of political power among the various inter-tribal societies, were predisposing conditions which were effective for many centuries. It is in this context and in these terms that a concept of history may be characterized for the Gola people.

The data selected for historical narration are clearly distinguished from the timeless mythological content of the *ma dong*. But extra-mundane phenomena are not excluded so long as they are purported to be the experiences of known persons living or dead. In this connexion it has been noted that the special visionary or clairvoyant powers believed to be the gift of the very aged—or of other specially endowed individuals—produces information which is quickly incorporated into local histories. Successful persons, whether they are Gola or members of some other culture, are believed to have achieved success because of their possession of such powers. Their opinions are sought and their behaviour carefully observed for useful materials which may be added to the repository of knowledge.

The Gola approach to the past is dynamic rather than static. Its motives are highly instrumental and the past is regarded as a potential reservoir of negotiable property. Knowledge can be bought, sold or bartered and, as the roots of knowledge lie in the past, access to it must be gained largely through the most aged who are about to become one's ancestors. Those who 'have their heads in the other world' are the most likely to discover 'new ideas'; for a new idea is merely the recognition of an old idea or its creative application to the solution of new problems. Thus, when a Gola man is confronted with something remarkable that he has not seen before, or which is new to his culture, he will frequently remark, 'The ancestors of the one who has dreamed that must have been great'. It is scarcely conceivable that anything of real value should have appeared in the world that was not already known by the elders of antiquity or, at least, now shared among them as an accumulated tradition in the spiritual domain in which they reside. If it is not known by the ancestors

of the Gola, it must certainly have been known by the ancestors of another people. It is significant, here, that the power of agents of western civilization to subjugate them in recent times is often attributed by the Gola to the greatness of the intruder's ancestors.

The duality (or multiplicity) of truth expressed in Gola historical narrative is a function of the diversity of the Gola uses of the past, as well as of the structure of society itself. Public truths are those which contribute to the solidarity of the community as a whole—the legends and myths which unite all segments in a common assurance of mutual security and worthiness. Public truths involve extensive compromise of sectional or individual differences of opinion. They represent ultimate or ideal values in the Gola conception of themselves as social beings with a noble heritage and a vital future. Private truths, however, emerge as instruments of individual and sub-group interests. Individuals, families, and various associations aimed at competitive placement in the world do not always share all that they know, nor are they ready to compromise private gain for the public good as a principle. Such behaviour would be considered as sheer irresponsibility, a sign of weakness, or even of evil intent. One does not share or compromise the secrets of one's special powers or those of one's family. One does not alter the carefully rationalized version of reality passed down by one's kin or other close associates except under the highly formalized conditions of public council and debate. To do so would be tantamount to selling one's birthright for a mess of pottage—or, as it would be expressed in Gola terms, 'The man who lays his secrets before the world, shows his rivals how to become his enemies'. This is considered to be as valuable a warning for the Gola as a people with reference to the outside world, as it is for special interest groups within the society, or for families and individuals. Each has its own sphere of private knowledge and private truth, and many kinds of knowledge associated with as many standards of truth may exist contemporaneously without doing violence to the Gola ethic.

In these manifest values, which seem so boldly instrumental to the westerner, lie many of the problems of communication between our two cultures. From an objective point of view it would appear that the Gola make explicit in their value system that which has become implicit and covert in the morality of our own complex civilization. The denial of overt self-seeking in means and ends, the stress upon individual responsibility to conform to ultimate standards of God-given or science-given truth, and the inherent duplicity that these moral demands encourage in an achievement-oriented industrial society, is an aspect of the vigorous Euro-american world view with which the Gola are only beginning to contend. The possibility that they will do so successfully in a unique way and without undue trauma is suggested by the flexibility and adaptiveness of their techniques of history. For these are directed to frankly practical ends within the ever-expanding boundaries of a changing world.